

November 8, 2009

Hebrews: Jesus, the Great High Priest

Purpose: To deepen our understanding of Jesus as High Priest

Key Bible reference: Hebrews 4.14-5.10, Hebrews 7

Key Verse: Hebrews 4.16

Biblical Interpretation

Refer to the article, "Jewish High Priest and the Sacrificial System".

Hebrews 4:14-16. The writer of Hebrews begins his statements about Christ as High Priest by saying that Christ is the Son of God who "has passed through the heavens" (Hebrews 4:14). This is a reference to the way in which the Jewish high priest passed through a veil in order to enter the holy of holies in the Temple, the earthly sanctuary (see Hebrews 9:1-7). In the confidence that Christ is the Son of God and has passed through the veil in the heavenly sanctuary, we can hold on to our confession; that is, we can continue to be faithful.

Christ is able to sympathize with our weakness. It is important that he be able to sympathize, that he be truly human. Unless he is truly human, having been "tested as we are, yet without sin" (4:15), he cannot be our Savior because he can never really understand our pain and temptation and falling away. But it is also important that he be the Son of God; for unless he is truly divine, he can only sympathize and nothing else. There is no power to change or save us. Because Christ is truly human and truly divine, we can approach him with boldness, knowing there is mercy and grace for our time of need.

Hebrews 5:1-4. How is the high priest able to sympathize with the weakness of his followers? The writer begins the answer by talking about

human high priests and which characteristics of their lives are important to the idea of Christ as High Priest.

The basic function of the high priest was to make atonement for sin. On the Day of Atonement, he entered the Holy of Holies to offer the sins of the people to God and to make atonement for them (Leviticus 16:1). Only the high priest could enter the holy of holies, and he could do so only on the Day of Atonement. He wore a rope tied around his waist, with the rope trailing behind him. If he had a heart attack or blacked out, other priests could pull him out of the holy of holies without actually entering it themselves and profaning it. Part of the act of atonement was tying a scroll containing the list of sins of the people to the horns of a goat (the scapegoat) and leading it out into the wilderness to die. The goat's death was a symbol of the sacrifice that took away the sin of the people.

The high priest was an intermediary with God, chosen to act on their behalf. Because the priest was human (subject to weakness), he was able to understand and deal gently with those who were weak and wayward. "Deal gently" (5:2) means literally to moderate emotion, particularly when the emotion is anger. An important attribute of sympathy is to moderate anger toward others and to treat them with consideration.

The high priest has to make atonement for himself as well as for the people because he is human (4:3; Leviticus 16:11). This is a major difference between him and Christ, the perfect High Priest, who makes atonement only for others.

The human high priest is called by God, who gives him the power to perform his function. Who would dare act or speak in the name of God without having a sense of God's call? We would shrink before the awesome effrontery of such action. But when God calls us to an office, we act because we are obeying God's call.

Verses 5-6. So even Christ did not choose the high priestly role; he was called to it by God. Again, the writer cites Psalms 2:7 and 110:4. In their original setting, these verses ascribed a priestly status to the king, in spite of the fact that Israel worked very hard at keeping king and priest separate. Not even David ever officiated at the altar. Only John Hyrcanus, one of the Hasmonean kings in the second century B.C., officially claimed the titles of both king and priest. The references remind us of another important reality about Christ: He is both High Priest and King of kings (Revelation 19:16).

Verses 7-10. These verses deal with the rhythm of pre-existence, incarnation, and exaltation. The rhythm is not unlike exhaling and inhaling. The Son comes forth from the Father and returns. The Son, who existed from all eternity, enters into time in the Incarnation. He returns to the Father in his exaltation.

"Jesus offered up prayers" (5:7)—this statement reminds us immediately of Gethsemane, though it may also refer to Jesus' prayers on the cross. The references to the days of his flesh (5:7) and his suffering (5:8) are important reminders of the Incarnation and of the weakness and

suffering through which Christ went as a human being.

"The one who was able to save him from death" (5:7) suggests something of the content of Jesus' prayers. He most likely prayed to God to be saved from the realm of death, that is, from the power of death.

Verse 8 reminds us of Christ's pre-existence ("Although he was a Son") and of the Incarnation ("learned obedience through what he suffered"). Suffering and death are not incompatible with being the Eternal Son. They are, indeed, essential to Christ's act of salvation. There is a parallel with the readers here. They (and we) are also expected to learn obedience in the midst of suffering. Jesus learned obedience in the sense that he came to appreciate fully what it means to do God's will. Therefore, he can be our intercessor—but also the model for us as we try to obey God's will.

The language about perfection in verse 9 draws us back to chapter 2. Christ's perfection was a fulfillment or completion of his office as high priest and sacrifice. Our obedience to him is a part of the completion, or perfection, of our own salvation. It has nothing to do with saving ourselves. Rather, our obedience is working out to completion the work Christ has already done in and for us.

When the writer says that God made Christ "high priest according to the order of Melchizedek" (5:10), he introduces a new idea into his understanding of Christology. He expands on this idea in chapter 7. In the first section (7:1-3) we are introduced to Melchizedek. In the second section (7:4-10) we learn that Melchizedek was superior to Abraham and, therefore, to the Levitical priests who were descended from Abraham. The third

section (7:11-22) argues that Christ as High Priest takes the place of the Levitical priesthood. The fourth section (7:23-25) confirms that the new High Priest is eternal. Finally, there is praise of the High Priest (7:26-28).

In Genesis 14:17-24, Melchizedek, king of Salem (Jerusalem), greets Abraham after his victory over the kings who had captured his nephew Lot. For our writer an important point is that Abraham gave Melchizedek a tithe of everything. The interpretations of the name Melchizedek (king of peace, for example) are standard Jewish interpretations, which the writer will use for his own purposes in describing Christ. The attributes describing Melchizedek in Hebrews 7:3 are ways of comparing him to the Son of God. Because Melchizedek is a timeless figure (The Bible gives no information about his birth or death.), he remains a priest forever. (It is as a priest with eternal life that Christ is superior to the Levites.)

Melchizedek was so great that even Abraham gave him tithes. The unspoken argument is that one gives tithes only to a superior. The Levites, who were descended from Abraham, are also therefore inferior to Melchizedek even though they have power to collect tithes from their people. Further, the Levites are mortal and Melchizedek is one who lives forever. This contrast between Melchizedek and the Levites is an anticipation of the contrast between Christ's eternal life and the succession of Levites, who die (7:23-24).

Verse 9 is a kind of playful exegesis, which the writer apparently does not want to carry too far. Taken to its logical extreme, the argument could mean that Jesus, too, paid tithes to Melchizedek. So the writer says, "One might

even say" when he refers to Levites paying tithes through Abraham.

The argument here is straightforward: If the old priesthood (that of the Levites) had been sufficient for salvation, there would have been no need for a new one. A change in priesthood also means a change in the law; Jesus was from the tribe of Judah, and Moses never said anything about a descendant of Judah being a priest. So the objection to Christ's priesthood is really one of eligibility. The writer of Hebrews, however, believes that Christ is qualified to be priest precisely because he was not of priestly lineage. Christ's priesthood is not based on the old law but on an indestructible life, as in Psalm 110:4. In Christ there is a new priesthood. The old commandment is also done away with; but in its place there arises, not a new commandment, but a better hope through which we have access to God.